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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

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SUBJECT : THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE STAND ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN
ARGENTINA; CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS

TIME & PLACE : THE AMERICAN CLUB OF BUENOS AIRES, DECEMBER 2, 1977

PARTICIPANTS : MSGR. KEVIN MULLEN, FIRST SECRETARY, EMBASSY OF THE
HOLY SEE;
WILLIAM H. HALLMAN, POLITICAL COUNSELOR, AMEMBASSY
BUENOS AIRES.

We discussed the recently concluded Conference attended by Roman Catholic bishops in Argentina, and the human rights presentation that resulted. Press reports had just the day before appeared stating that Cardinal Raul Primatesta (Archbishop of Cordoba and Conference President), Cardinal Juan Carlos Aramburu (Archbishop of Buenos Aires) and Msgr. Vicente Zaspé (Archbishop of Santa Fe) had on November 30 lunched with President Videla and presented him with a confidential document setting out the Conference's findings.

Monsignor Mullen said that the document notes that no improvement has taken place since the Bishops' Conference in May, when the Bishops made public a statement of concern over disappearances, prolonged detention without stated charges and harsh detention and prison conditions that include the use of torture. The document handed to President Videla on November 30 adds new concerns over a deterioration of wages and working conditions and cites grave inequities in incomes and social conditions. Unlike the May document -- which was a proclamation and summation -- the November document is more a "laundry list" of presentations by individual bishops each describing incidents in and the situation of his See.

Although the "aide-memoire" (Msgr. Mullen's term) was handed only to Videla, copies were sent to the President's colleagues in the Junta, Admiral Massera and General Agosti.

Asked why the bishops had decided not to publish this most recent declaration, Mullen replied that it was the bishops' consensus that since no improvement had resulted from their earlier, publicized effort it seemed apparent they needed to change tactics.

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The bishops hope that their aide-memoire will be privately shared by Junta members with senior military colleagues, and that enough concern will be aroused to filter down into military "working levels".

Msgr. Mullen reported that when presented with the bishops' aide-memoire President Videla had replied to the effect that he was aware of these grievances, and wished only that he had the power to correct them. (This comment should not be cited, since it was given Mullen confidentially by a person who attended the private luncheon.)

CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS. The spectrum of political opinion in the Roman Catholic hierarchy of Argentina runs between churchmen who actually have been associated with the terrorist movement and those who believe that whatever happens to a terrorist -- even to another priest of the church -- is probably no more than he has coming to him.

The Argentine Government is deeply suspicious, Mullen said, of any member of the hierarchy who is not 100% behing the government's repression. There is an apparently genuine belief that many priests --- and even bishops --- are "marxists". This is especially true of priests who have involved themselves in social action programs. La Rioja's former Bishop Angelelli, for example, was widely suspected of being a marxist as is Neuquen's present bishop, Jaime Nevares, for Nevares' activity in the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights. (Bishop Angelelli was killed during August of 1976 in a curious automobile accident, returning from a requiem for two priests who had been taken by persons who said they were security agents and subsequently found murdered by a roadside.)

Msgr. Mullen described his Embassy's efforts to find out the fate of many detained and disappeared persons about whom the Nunciatura receives letters. Neither the Nuncio nor himself deal any more with Minister Arlia's Foreign Office Working Group -- preferring to deal directly with Minister of Interior Harguindeguy or First Army Corps Commander Suarez Mason, with whom they have reasonably close working relations. ("Not that they'll give us answers either," Mullen said, "It's just that we grew tired of fighting it out with Arlia.") Mullen said that one of his unpleasant duties is dealing with a great deal of really abusive correspondence all to the effect that "well, you're the Vatican's men in that Catholic country -- so get off it and do something."

HUMAN RIGHTS AS A PUBLIC ISSUE. Mullen said that he does not detect great public outrage in Argentina against the principle of human rights violations, only sadness on the part of affected families. Certainly, he said, public concern is in-

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insufficient to move army commanders and police authorities

POL: WILLIAM H. HALLMAN
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